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Feeling Comfortable in the Room: Diversity on Television Writing Staffs

Recently at a discussion panel, I witnessed some alarming comments made by two writers of the Fox comedy *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. These two young, smiling writers, along with three of their coworkers, sat holding microphones on a stage before an audience of people in rapt attention, notebooks on their laps, ready to record the panel's wisdom about breaking into the industry. The panelists started by making jokes about Donald Trump, but--and this is the part that shocked me--by the end of their discussion, it seemed that some of them bought into the same "us versus them" mentality about race that Trump uses to energize his base. One writer, who had also worked on shows like *30 Rock* and *The Mindy Project*, suggested that white men might want to find writing partners, as it was becoming harder for them to get hired now that shows are trying to increase diversity. The other writer then jumped in to add that minorities would always be in the minority by definition, which I took to be some sort of reassurance for the white aspiring writers in the audience. This fear that non-white writers take jobs away from white writers reveals one of many reasons why efforts to increase diversity in TV writers' rooms have been abysmal. And while many in the TV industry may be content that current diversity programs are addressing the problem of homogenous writers' rooms as much as is possible, the lack of acknowledgement of the forces that keep writers' rooms full of mostly white men clearly shows that current programs aren't working.

But why worry so much about diversity in the first place? It's a nice idea, but is it the job of the TV industry to address social problems? Isn't it their job to make money? While that's certainly true, we as a society have also decided that it's in our interest to force businesses to address social justice issues by passing laws that address historical inequities. We already expect businesses not to discriminate based on race and gender, so we should care when businesses with documented race- and gender-based representation problems aren't addressing them. If people who hire TV writers keep hiring white men at disproportionate numbers, then why doesn't that raise a red flag? Besides, the ideology of "liberal Hollywood" seems to support the inclusion of those who have been historically marginalized. Indeed, that's why so many diversity programs already exist. The problem is that they aren't working.

Besides the fear that diversity efforts will decrease opportunities for white men writers, another part of the problem lies in the reluctance of those in power to acknowledge the negative consequences of diversity. As business professor Katherine W. Phillips notes in her article "How Diversity Makes Us Smarter," "Research has shown that social diversity in a group can cause discomfort, rougher interactions, a lack of trust, greater perceived interpersonal conflict, lower communication, less cohesion, more concern about disrespect, and other problems." In other words, diverse groups have the potential to be less enjoyable than homogenous groups. This research-backed conclusion helps to explain why writers' rooms remain homogenous. Who would want to be in a room that is uncomfortable, contentious, or incohesive? Yet, diversity is often portrayed as a kind of magical state where different types of people join hands and heal the world. While diversity does make the world a better place in the end, people in the TV industry

must acknowledge its negative aspects if they are to successfully create more diverse writers' rooms.

For instance, many people who hire TV writers have said that not only are they looking for talent, but they are also looking for someone with whom they wouldn't mind spending long hours in a room every day. While they might not consciously exclude people based on factors like race and gender, there's certainly a possibility that they're unconsciously avoiding potential discomfort by hiring people who look like them. Their desire to avoid being trapped with unpleasant people in a room may unconsciously turn into a desire to avoid unpleasant situations. If being in a diverse group is sometimes less pleasant than being in a homogenous group, which research shows to be true, then the people who hire TV writers must learn to be wary of their desire to avoid discomfort and conflict.

There's also the issue of people hiring from within their social and professional networks. Many people who hire TV writers hire people they already know. In terms of hiring writers, this introduces the problem of *homophily*, or the tendency for people to cluster around and share information with others who share certain traits. Sociologists McPherson et al. offer this definition: "Homophily is the principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people" (416). This fact, combined with the importance of "industry connections" in being hired as a writer, means that people will tend to hire others who share traits with them, especially as far as race is concerned. Considering the principle of homophily, then, a white showrunner is likely to have more social connections with other white people. If that showrunner hires people they know already, then they are much more likely to hire other white writers.

Because of homophily, information about available jobs might also be funneled through racial filters. As McPherson et al. note, "Homophily implies that distance in terms of social characteristics translates into network distance, the number of relationships through which a piece of information must travel to connect two individuals" (416). They're essentially saying that information will more easily flow between people of the same race. (They note that the effect is as strong in terms of gender.) So, to put that fact in the context of TV writing, if the white writers who currently work in television learn of new job opportunities, other white writers are more likely to learn about those job opportunities, as well, resulting in fewer opportunities for non-white writers.

Economic issues might also make it more difficult for non-white writers to find jobs in writers' rooms. For example, *Mad Men* creator Matthew Weiner, in writing about his struggle to become a television writer, illustrates the importance that economic resources can play. He writes of not being able to find a job after graduating from USC, a prestigious (and expensive) school: "So for the next three years I stayed home and wrote spec scripts. My friends had day jobs, but I didn't. My wife, Linda, worked hard as an architect and supported us." While Weiner's dedication to reaching his goal is impressive, he was fortunate to be in a position where he could work on his craft for three years without having to bring home a paycheck. Not everyone is so lucky. And, of course, one's race and gender also play a role in the financial resources one has access to, on average. According to Census data, the median income for white, non-Hispanic households was around $65,000 in 2016 (Semega et al. 6). By contrast, the median income for black households was around $39,000. For Hispanic households, the median income was around $48,000. The Census data also show that women earn around 81 percent of what men make

(Semega et al. 10). These facts make it easy to see that, on average, fewer non-white non-men will be able to have the time to train and practice the craft the way that Matthew Weiner did.

Taken altogether, the factors I've mentioned demonstrate the difficulty of increasing diversity in TV writers' rooms. They help to explain why a recent analysis published by the Writers Guild of America shows little or no improvement in race and gender diversity in writers' rooms (Hunt). That study also details how few women writers and writers of color there are compared with the population as a whole. It's an important first step that organizations like the Writers Guild are studying the lack of diversity among TV writers, and it's also helpful that they've implemented programs designed to combat this problem. As their own research shows, however, this problem isn't going away. More effort is needed to understand the underlying mechanisms that keep women and writers of color out of writers' rooms. With this knowledge, it will perhaps be easier to implement more effective diversity programs in the future.

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